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Kyle Powys White
Michigan State University

Paul B. Thompson
Michigan State University

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A ROLE FOR ETHICAL ANALYSIS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH ON AGRIFOOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS

KYLE POWYS WHYTE and **PAUL B. THOMPSON**
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Lawrence Busch claims that, although some philosophers may recognize the ethical import of standards, they do not endeavor to understand how people justify standards in social reality. The argument in this paper is that the Michigan State University (MSU) School of Agrifood Governance and Technoscience should actually be understood as fleshing out a more important role for ethicists. This argument is explored through an analysis of the MSU School's research on standards, a reassessment of J.O. Urmson's "On Grading," and a review of major ethical theories, from utilitarianism to discourse ethics. The conclusion is that, though standards may be used and justified within social networks and worlds, there will always be points where their determination and application require discussion by stakeholders and other publics. It is at these points that the reasons offered in support of various standards should be subject to debate and skepticism, and the role of ethics as an activity is crucial in conjunction with social scientific research.

In *Standards: Recipes for Reality*, Lawrence Busch (2011) discussed the relationship between standards and ethics. He argues that we often appeal to ethical rationales, from consequences to virtues to justice, to evaluate, promote and justify technical, regulatory, and market standards, and shows how science and power relations overlap and blend with these ethical rationales in subtle ways in processes of standardization. In cases like fair trade labeling, ethics can be seen to steer the trajectory of standards development, while in other cases, like greenwashing, it is a mere veneer that disguises the influence of power. Most typically, perhaps, ethical considerations exert a partial or soft influence on the way that actors can form networks to achieve objectives.

The title of this paper was prompted by a further claim that Busch made in *Standards* about the capacity of ethicists to analyze standards. He claimed that, while philosophers may recognize the ethical import of standards, they do not take the empirical turn (Achterhuis 2001) – that is, they do not endeavor to tell us about how ordinary people justify standards in social reality. What is more, each of the three major philosophical positions on ethics can be used to test a particular standard's consistency with that position, yet gauging consistency in this way may have little to no value for those who will use or be affected by the standard. We read Busch's claim as raising an important question: if ethical analysis is unrelated to the subject matter of social research, then is there any role for it beyond intellectual exercise?

In this paper, we reassess how ethical analysis is related to social research on standards by using Busch's theory of standards for a different purpose. Indeed, among sociologists writ large, Busch himself is already far more intimately engaged with the ideas and work of philosophers than most, and his coverage of the relationship between ethics and standards can be recast in a way that brings out the importance of ethical analysis as an activity to be pursued alongside social studies of standards. Central to our claim is the idea that the theory of standards advanced by Busch and his collaborators (i.e., the MSU School of Agrifood Governance and Technoscience) should be deployed as another perspective on what ethicists see themselves as doing in their capacity as ethical analysts. Though standards may be used and justified within social networks and worlds, there will always be points where their determination and application require discussion by stakeholders and other publics. It is at these points that the reasons offered in support of various standards should be subject to debate and skepticism, and the role of ethics *as an activity* dedicated to this very task is crucial for sorting out claims about the effects of standards on interested parties and the public. Ethical analysis has a place alongside social studies of standards as the activity that explores and maintains the space where reason-based discussion can occur.

THE MSU SCHOOL OF STANDARDS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR ETHICS

The Michigan State University (MSU) School of Agrifood Governance and Technoscience refers to the group of scholars whose social research has advanced the study of food and agricultural standards initiated by Busch at MSU (Busch 1997, 2000; Busch and Bingen 2006; Busch et al. 1994; Busch and Tanaka 1996; David and Thompson 2008; Hatanaka, Bain, and Busch 2006; Loconto and Busch 2010). One point of entry into the theory of standards developed by the MSU School is the four kinds of standards described by Busch: (1) Olympian; (2) filters; (3) ranks; (4) divisions. Olympian standards are used when we seek to pick out a winner. The form of the Olympian standard allows one to identify a single person, product, or natural thing as the best within a particular time or space. Anything that does not meet the standard is inferior, and nothing can be ranked higher. Within the world of food and agriculture, Olympian standards are represented by balsamic vinegars certified by the AIB of Modena, or beef and pork from Niman Ranch. Different from Olympian standards, filters represent a minimum threshold. They measure whether people or things are of a certain kind. Food safety standards often serve as filters, requiring strict limits on pesticide residues, bacterial

contamination, types of packaging used, and time between creation of the product and its sale. Ranks are a third kind of standard and serve to put people and things in some linear hierarchical order. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grades for meat (Prime, Choice, Select, and Standard) order meat quality according to marbling or visible fat. The last kind of standards are divisions, which are simply unranked categories. Apples are often divided into McIntosh, Granny Smith, and Fuji, among others. Officially, at least, the USDA organic standard is a division: it explicitly denies any implied quality; it simply designates that the food product is of a certain type as represented by the requirements of the organic standard. It divides foods on the U.S. market into two classes: organic and non-organic (Busch 2000, 2011).

A core tenet of the MSU School is the idea that these standards are more than technical criteria for assessing the objective quality and consistency of various entities, from humans to technologies to nonhuman animals. Standards are produced through social processes and are implemented within networks of human and nonhuman actors. Understood this way, standards serve to bring into being what they are produced to assess; standards are ontological devices that co-produce human practices of classification, measurement, and compliance along with their objects of assessment. In this respect, standards classify and govern human beings every bit as much as they classify and order things (Bowker and Star 2000).

Research from the MSU School has documented these processes of co-production, an example being Busch and Tanaka's (1996) work on Canola. Canola is rapeseed that has near-zero erucic acid in its oil and near-zero gluconsinolates in its meal, the two compounds being removed from rapeseed through breeding and biochemistry (Tanaka, Juska, and Busch 1999). The array of Canola standards used from farm to fork give us knowledge about Canola, serving to bring it to being as seed, grain, oil, meal, and cooking oil. We would not be able to consistently recognize Canola if it were not consistently measured to ensure compliance with the standards. The standards permit us to differentiate it from other oilseeds and cooking oils as well as to distinguish among batches of Canola. This gives us a sense of what Canola oil is supposed to smell and taste like, and a moral assessment of its human producers, processors, sellers, and consumers. In this way, Canola only exists because standards engender its existence and allow it to be defined as what we recognize it to be (Busch et al. 1994; Busch and Tanaka 1996; Tanaka 1999; Tanaka and Busch 2003).

This work has significant implications for ethics. First, the emphasis on social process in the development of standards fills an important gap left between

philosophies or sociologies of science and technology that deny any role to nature or nonhuman agency in technological design and scientific theory selection, on the one hand, and the actor-network theory of Callon and Latour, in which things become enrolled in networks and may sometimes be playing decisive roles with human agents, on the other (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 1987; Bijker 1995; Callon 1991, 1992; Latour 1993, 2005; Law and Hassard 1999). Like in the research on Canola, the MSU School of Agrifood Governance and Technoscience can be thought of as offering more detailed accounts of how the process of enrolling things occurs through processes of standardization. When these details become visible, the actions of humans in the network can be seen to prepare roles (largely fixed by the standards developed) that things can occupy. This theoretical move has ethical significance because these processes of standards development (undertaken by human agents) become a site for ethical critique, even while adopting an ontology that permits outcomes and events to be understood as network effects. Theorists who have worried that actor-network theory represents a retreat into a kind of determinism can thus be assured that there is a locus in the analysis where claims that a given result is simply the voice of nature, or alternatively, the inevitability of technological progress can be resisted and critiqued.

Second, practitioners of the MSU School have pressed the ethical and political significance of standards by noting that any standard that measures things also measures people. In the most straightforward sense, the standard determines access to goods and opportunities made possible by the operation of the network. With food quality standards implemented by retailers, one is able or unable to sell one's product through the network. Yet more subtly, perhaps, the standards regulate people within the network, requiring them to undertake practices required for certification and enforcement of standards, and limiting their discretion to link or interact with other humans. Failing to meet a standard, for example, is a reflection on the producer's identity and reputation, and there are implications for being substandard. Finally, standards can become the seed for what David Grewal (2009) has called network power. As the practices defined and mandated by the existence of a standard become widespread, it becomes impossible for someone wishing to participate in some aspect of the food system to avoid using them, even when they lack any official legal standing. Although European law does not require foods to be GM free, widespread actions taken by the European supermarket sector have made this into a standard for those companies wishing access to European markets. This form of soft power can spark resentment and resistance, and may be a source of ethical debate about fairness and opportunity.

STANDARDS AND ETHICAL ANALYSIS

Though the MSU School's work has significance for ethics, what is the relationship between ethical analysis and social research on standards? In *Standards*, Busch began the chapter on ethics by discussing a literature in philosophy that devolves from a paper by J.O. Urmson in which Urmson offers the practice of grading apples as his primary case study or thought experiment (Baker 1951; Baylis 1958; Britton 1951; Browning 1960, 1963; Clegg 1966; Evans 1962; Miller 1965; Taylor 1962; Urmson 1950). Busch showed how philosophers contributing to this literature have taken different views on what standards were thought to be, as well as on how they are related to ethical judgments. His summary statement on that debate derived five conclusions:

1. There is an "irreducible moral element to those standards that involve ranks, filters and Olympics, while divisions appear to have little moral import."
2. Standards apply to humans as well as non-humans. "We are the ones who order things," but we become implicated in the standards we use to order the world.
3. "Some standards are easier to formalize than others."
4. "Formal standards can and perhaps must do violence to some by insisting that a judgment be made without regard to their particular circumstances."
5. "Formal standards are necessarily linked to some institutionalized form of authority" (Busch 2011:227-228).[1]

Busch (2011) commented that Urmson and his critics tell us little about how to evaluate standards themselves. He then turned to a "rapid tour through ethics (with apologies to ethicists)" (2011:228).

Specifically, Busch claimed that each of the three major philosophical positions on ethics – consequentialism, Kantianism, and virtue – offers insights into the subject of standards. The tour shows us that standards have consequences and can thus be evaluated considering their consequences. Similarly, they are bound up in our notions of rights: positive law and institutional policy either facilitate or frustrate the guarantee of moral rights as they are conceptualized in classical philosophical terms. What is more, standards may either promote or frustrate virtue. We propose that all of this connects usefully and accurately with the way

[1]Quoted sentences and passages from Busch 2011 are from the 2010 manuscript. The correspondence author of this paper may be contacted for pagination updates for the manuscript that will be published by MIT Press in 2011.

that most philosophers currently understand consequentialist, rights-based, and virtue-based ethical theories.

But Busch went on to say that these theories "tell us little about how people substantively justify the use of standards" (Busch 2011:230). He then provided a discussion of social identities and linked that discussion to Boltanski and Thévenot's ([1991] 2006) worlds of justification, concluding that "different worlds require different types of standards" (Busch 2011:239). Busch noted that problems occur when standards are developed that cross several worlds, and also when "those committed to the standards for one world attempt to argue that their standards should be applied to all worlds" (Busch 2011:241). The section ended with critical remarks about the way that those fascinated by the world of the market have attempted to colonize other worlds with their own standards. Busch's utilization of Boltanski and Thévenot's worlds of justification is summarized in the Table 1.

TABLE 1. WORLDS OF JUSTIFICATION, EXAMPLES OF STANDARDS, AND COMMON TYPES.

WORLD	STANDARDS	COMMON TYPE OF STANDARDS
Merchant.	Volume of sales, profits made, value added, wealth accumulated	Ranks
Civic.	Cities with vibrant economy, social life, sense of collective belonging, effective provision of public services.	Filters
Inspirational....	Display of brilliance, insight, avoidance of publicity	Olympian
Domestic.....	Manners, comportment, loyalty	Ranks, Divisions
Industrial.	Precision, accuracy, usefulness, efficiency, formal qualifications	Ranks, Divisions
Opinion.	Fame, renown, eminence, notoriety	Olympian
Environmental.	Non-polluting, clean, in harmony with nature	Filters

If the justification of standards is based on Boltanski and Thévenot's understanding of worlds, then ethical analysis does not amount to much more than some puzzling over what standards are (e.g., Urmson and critics) or carrying out matching exercises between the philosophical positions and a developing or actual standard. This suggests that professional ethicists who use philosophical positions have a limited role in understanding and shaping standards. Assuming one of these philosophical positions, an ethicist can only see whether a developing or actual

standard is consistent in the abstract with the requirements of that position. In contexts where such consistency matters to the actors on the ground, there is a role for ethical analysis. Still, even in such cases, it is likely that such consistency is not the only justification that matters to the actors. Whether a standard is justified in one of these worlds is a matter of what social agreements, assumptions, norms, goals, priorities, and perceptions, have come to be in place. In this sense, ethical analysis and argumentation appear as intellectual exercises that take place a few degrees removed from the world of standards in which the sociology of science is immersed. We seek to amend this suggestion about ethical analysis in the following two sections.

RE-READING URMSON

At the risk of dragging sociologists through some rather abstruse turf in twentieth-century metaethics, we argue that a more contextual reading of Urmson shows that he, like Busch, was cognizant of standards as part of social processes, and was in fact attempting to highlight contingent social practice in his (1950) article. The important insight from Urmson is that if moral grading labels, like "good person," are analogous to other grading labels, like those applying to apples, then ethical analysis must consider irreducible social elements, and cannot rest satisfied with attempting to provide universal justification. Ethical analysis is an activity that involves careful consideration of the status of moral principles and ideas within the socially rich contexts of behavior.

Like most philosophy, Urmson's article is subject to several different readings that would depend significantly on something that is not specified very clearly in the article itself, namely, what one thinks that Urmson was arguing against. One possibility is the view that ethics and ethical concepts are thoroughly non-natural, that they are in no way fixed or influenced by empirical inquiries of the sort performed in the natural and social sciences. This view might be traced to others, but in 1950 it was most prominently associated with G. E. Moore. Moore had argued that given any definition, specification, or characterization of goodness, it is still meaningful to ask "But is that *really* good?" This implies, he thought, that the good (in the normative or ethical sense) cannot be analyzed into more fundamental concepts, and as such was not amenable to tests or criteria. One could only know that something is good through a simple act of intuition: One could *see* that a state of affairs was good, but one could not offer further criteria or specification that would explain why this was the case. Moore's view on the irreducibly intuitive basis

for moral judgment became the basis for an early twentieth-century consensus that matters of morality are entirely subjective (Moore 1922).

By the time that Urmson was writing "On Grading," a different view was ascendant – one which held that ethical statements to the effect that some practice is good or bad are better understood as implying commands or prescriptions to act or behave in a certain manner. One version of this view (emotivism) retained the subjectivist orientation: To express an ethical norm is just to express one's subjective feelings about how one wished oneself or others to act. Another position (prescriptivism) broke from the subjectivist mold by arguing that valid ethical norms are prescriptions (e.g., instructions about what to do or how to act) that can survive the logical tests of universalization. If norms are *merely* statements that are true or false to the extent that they express an individual's subjective preference, it is difficult to see how they could possibly hold universally (i.e., for everyone). However, one does not generate contradictions or absurdities when one interprets the norm as a prescription for behavior, because prescriptions do not have truth values.

It is within this context that Urmson, in the first half of "On Grading," described several apple grades and the criteria used to apply them. Using this example, he made some points about the relationship between the grading label and the criteria. On the one hand, he argued that the criteria are not analytically related to the grading label (i.e., the latter is not just another name for the former). On the other hand, he also argued that the grading label is neither an emotional response, nor an intuition that always arises in conjunction with the criteria. After making these points, Urmson (1950) wrote that,

> So far we have confined our study of grading to cases where it is fairly clear that there are criteria for grading, and without asking whether there must always be accepted criteria, or why the accepted criteria are accepted. We have certainly said nothing whatsoever to deal with such special problems as that raised by the moral reformer, who is often clearly intelligible and yet may almost be defined as the man who does not accept the accepted criteria" (p. 163).

Here, Urmson acknowledged that there is a difference between the philosophical puzzles over the relationship between grading labels and criteria and the actual ways in which criteria come to be in social reality. The moral reformers, after all, reject criteria that are already instantiated in their societies. In claiming this,

Urmson's intention was not to divide philosophical inquiry from social scientific inquiry, leaving to the philosophers the puzzles and to the social scientists the study of the actual ways in which things come to be. Urmson saw the issue of how grades and criteria emerge through social processes as something that ethical analysis cannot abandon – a point we will describe further in what follows.

Urmson (1950) wrote that "…the question whether there are any objective and accepted criteria for grading and how they function, which we have just left, is a quite different problem from the problem why we employ and accept these criteria" (p. 164). He then claimed that many philosophers had not fully realized this and that "certain theories could be much more powerfully stated if they took it into account" (1950:164). His examples of this were philosophical positions in ethics that cannot be universally justified, but have particular justification in close relation to particular social contexts. Urmson considered subjectivism, which as a universal account of the good, is absurd. The passage below expresses Urmson's (1950) view on how positions like subjectivism should be understood alongside social processes:

> To say that there are no objective criteria, that there is no right or wrong opinion about whether this is good cheese (to take a case of something which is clearly not good as a means), a good lap-dog, seems quite preposterous. Anyone who knew about cheese or dogs would laugh at you. It is equally preposterous…to hold that a statement that some cheese is good is a statistical statement about peoples' likes and dislikes, passions and emotions. But if we remodel this latter subjectivist theory and treat it not as a theory about the way we use the word 'good' but as a theory about how the criteria for grading cheese or lap-dogs come to be accepted and established, it becomes a much more plausible theory. The theory will now admit our account of how we use the word 'good;' its contribution will be as follows: it is a fact that there is a stable majority (we need not now settle among which people the majority will be) who prefer, like, choose, cheese with the characteristics ABC. Then ABC become the characteristics which are accepted, even by the minority, for grading cheese. Thus even if one happens to hate all cheese one will still be able sensibly to distinguish good from bad cheese; *mutatis mutandis* the same applies to lap-dogs or anything else. Before the acceptance of such conventional criteria for good cheese the question whether some sample of cheese is good will have no answer. After their acceptance the question will have a definite answer. This seems to me,

> thus recast as an answer to a different question, a very formidable theory. In the case of cheese it is just about right (p. 164).

Urmson continued with other examples, claiming that the utilitarian position could be recast as a theory that we choose the criteria we do because those things that satisfy these criteria to a high degree more easily serve the ends for which we employ them. He then claimed that there are many problems with utilitarianism, but that sometimes, such as the sharpness of the knife, the position is very plausible. In this sense, utilitarianism seems valid within certain domains of the lifeworld (1950). Urmson (1950) concluded that "…few philosophical theories have the monopoly of all truth; any rival which survives long does so because it has got hold of some important point. But most of the prevalent philosophical theories about the meaning of the 'good' can be recast as theories of how we arrive at criteria of goodness" (p. 164-165).

In short, Urmson (1950) pointed out that there are unmistakable social dimensions to how we go about grading. He wrote:

> Or consider social theories of goodness (especially moral goodness) which hold that a man or form of behavior is good in so far as he or it contributes to social life and well-being. Once again, considered as an account of why we accept *some* of the criteria of goodness, I have no doubt that it is of value. No doubt truthfulness as a criterion of a good man is at least in part accepted for this kind of reason. And if anyone wishes to maintain that this is a *rational* ground for accepting the criterion, why not? I have no doubt that there are other reasons for accepting criteria for grading, but we cannot aim at a complete catalogue; in no circumstance could we have a right to regard any catalogue as complete. No doubt some criteria for some things are retained for all kinds of odd reasons. Perhaps few people nowadays could imagine why a family is better if the names of more of its former members and their interrelationships are recorded (p. 165).

The social processes involved in grading make the project of universal justification an impossible and impractical one. Justification involves a kind of balance between criteria we want to preserve and promote for their rational qualities and criteria that have emerged through social processes.

Urmson then discussed the issue of disputes over grading. "If the disagreement is minor it matters no more than minor disagreements about the requirements for

baldness. But disagreement is admittedly not always minor; the slayer and eater of aged parents and the moral reformer now rear their ugly and reverend heads" (Urmson 1950:165-166). Urmson then described the main patterns of moral and other grading disagreements, emphasizing the social character at root. Urmson's (1950) conclusion was that:

> If this rough schema of disagreements be accepted (in practice of course the types will be complicated and mixed up with each other) the answer to the problem of disagreement about grading criteria seems to be this: grading words can only be *used* successfully for communication where criteria are accepted. Where they are not there can only be confusion and cross purposes until it is seen that the only discussion possible between such people is what criteria for grading to adopt – grading words must then be discussed, not used (p. 166).

Urmson does not appear to be so far off from Boltanski and Thévenot. If grades have criteria used to show whether a person or thing meets a standard, then those criteria only make sense in certain historical and social environments. Urmson was adamant that some grades are less controversial than others, say apple standards (uncontroversial) and standards of moral character (controversial). For Urmson to say this, and consistent with his other points, he had to accept that in some contexts grades are uncontroversial whereas in others they are not. Moral character is often very controversial precisely because it affects the many different hats that we wear, like Botanski and Thévenot's worlds. We worry about our moral character at work because it reflects overall on our moral character, although what we have to do at work is very different from what we have to do at home and in other worlds. The same could be said about grades and standards that impact vulnerable parties, or that have other high stakes associated with them. At these points, critical discussion of standards is crucial as an activity that may contribute to reducing harms and protecting people and their communities.

The philosophical understanding of standards forwarded by Urmson advances the ideas (a) that both the bindingness and consequences of a standard are based on how criteria were generated for it, and (b) that criteria have an irreducible social element. Ethical analyses, as grading exercises, are always linked to the social world where those standards will be practiced and the sorts of social assumptions that are or should be available for standards to work. Simultaneously, Urmson allowed that there comes at time when grading words must be discussed, rather than used. It is

at those times that ethics as a discipline comes to the fore as an important activity for addressing controversies over standards and criteria.

THE TAXONOMY OF STANDARDS AND MORAL THEORY

In this section we argue that Busch's taxonomy of standards can illuminate how ethicists have understood their moral theories and differentiated them from rival moral theories. We take it that moral theory is an activity, rather than a theory proper: it is a form of discussion that arises at those junctures when it becomes necessary to discuss standards, not just use them. The attempt to specify a comprehensive (universal) theory of ethics has been, for the last 250 years at least, an exercise in (or activity of) standard setting, and Busch's taxonomy helps us understand why.

First, it bears saying that to the extent that ethics is understood to be an academic specialization – something Busch implicitly seems to accept – most self-identified academic ethicists could be said to regard ethics as an attempt to develop an account of standards that will resolve controversies and disagreements. Thus, we submit that ethicists think that they know how people arrive at standards, and are now telling us how they should do so. This point can perhaps best be made by example. Jeremy Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781) tells us that in every domain the Olympian standard is to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number (the utilitarian maxim). Bentham discussed in some detail several cases in which moral or legal judgments are made, and his account of sentencing decisions in criminal cases marks one of the clearest applications of utilitarian reasoning ever produced. Bentham took cognizance of the way that a criminal sentence creates incentives for avoiding criminal behavior (or at least getting caught) among the general population. He took care to describe how the broadly specified standard expressed by the utilitarian maxim requires substantial elaboration to be applied in particular circumstances, and some more obvious ways of working out those specifications have proven to involve internal contradictions. In this sense, utilitarianism commonly involves a commitment to Olympian standards, to a notion that what is ethical is always "the best one could do," while simultaneously maintaining a commitment to the activity of understanding this standard as others would on the ground in actual situations (Bentham [1781] 1988).

John Stuart's Mill's adaptations of the utilitarian program, especially in "On Liberty," were intended to show how we use Bentham's master standard to evaluate subsidiary standards. Because the act of applying a standard itself has consequences,

trying to calculate or ensure the "greatest good for the greatest number" every time can have costs that outweigh the benefits. So we do develop ranks, divisions, and filters; though the ensemble of ranks, divisions, and filters that we develop are still, for a utilitarian, expected to meet Bentham's Olympian test (Mill [1869] 2006). Mill, we believe, would see Boltanski and Thévenot's worlds as divisions that parse our conduct so that we may more efficiently apply more nuanced standards in distinct domains, but he would want to know whether the parsing they identify satisfies the utilitarian maxim, at the end of the day. Thus the activity of ethical analysis casts divisions as having moral import.

Kant's three critiques, in contrast, specify three different worlds of justification, which we might characterize as science, morality, and ethics. The perspective of justification for the world of science transcends the capabilities of human consciousness. Even the attempt to characterize criteria for that world embroils us in antinomies. The world of morality is the domain circumscribed by Kant's master standard, the categorical imperative, which is, we think, a filter. Those standards that follow from our attempt to consistently apply the principle of autonomy, both to ourselves and to others, are the only standards of which we can be certain. In Kant's view, these core moral commitments are universal: they apply to all people always. The third critique describes many worlds where standards vary from community to community. Here we get standards in art, and in those matters of opinion and politics that are not already addressed by the categorical imperative, and very much as Busch has suggested, there will be standards of all sorts and we must rely on negotiated procedures and social practice to gain footing here (Kant [1788] 1997; Kant [1787] 1998; Kant [1790] 2000).

In distinguishing science from the normative worlds of morality and ethics, Kant proposed a division, but it is a division with a normative purpose. Kant wanted above all to protect normative standards from colonization by the methods of science, which can at best approximate truths having no moral content. While Busch may be most concerned about the colonizing tendencies of the merchant world, the neo-Kantian environmental philosopher Mark Sagoff has campaigned tirelessly against social science disciplines that tell us scientific facts about ourselves and the natural world, then use these facts as if they had normative content. Sagoff's ire has been directed especially at techniques in economics that measure preference, understood as how people do in fact behave, but that are then interpreted as if they set a standard for what people want, or for what serves their moral or ethical interests (Sagoff 1988). In this respect, Sagoff was reacting to a particularly

pernicious way in which social scientists have (perhaps unreflectively) acceded to the emotivism and prescriptivism that Urmson was critiquing.[2]

Both Mill and Kant proposed ways of thinking about standards that open the possibility for multiple domains or worlds for standard setting, though both also incorporate an absolute standard into their theoretical apparatus. For Mill the final standard is the utilitarian maxim as the Olympian standard of standards; for Kant it is the categorical imperative as the filter of standards, a filter that incorporates the division between science and normativity. The opening to diversity ties them to liberalism, but the absoluteness of their theoretical project may be what has made these approaches dominant during the last 200 years.

Neither virtue approaches nor pragmatism rise to dogmatism implicit in the absolutism of both utilitarian and neo-Kantian moral theory. Virtue theories may be said to fall back into a Hegelian reaction to the Kantian project: autonomy rests on nothing more than the community spirit of liberal societies, hence in truth *everything* comes down to ethics, which is another way of saying that it comes down to the culture of distinct communities. John Dewey's pragmatism, to which Busch has alluded favorably, attempted to move beyond the alternatives presented by Mill, Kant, and Hegel by emphasizing the process of inquiry in place of a theory of standards. For Dewey, theory (hence standards) is just one phase of inquiry, albeit a phase especially prized by intellectuals and by anyone institutionally tied to the academic world. Inquiry always begins at a historical point, which means that it inherits the deposit of standards that happen to have accreted at that point. Each and all these standards may be drawn upon during inquiry, and each can be used as a vantage point to critique the others. In one sense, inquiry is open-ended. It never ends, so the process of critique and counter-critique can continue indefinitely (Dewey 1938). In practice of course, we do things, and these actions create changes in the circumstances that may have launched any particular inquiry. As such, we can think of particular inquiries ending in actions, and thus reflecting whatever standards were coalescent when action occurred. Yet for pragmatists, these standards are fallible: it is always possible that a subsequent inquiry will show them to have been mistaken. They will be *seen* to be mistaken in light of new standards coalescent at the moment of judgment in the subsequent inquiry.

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[2] Miller (1965), one commentary in the literature on Urmson, makes the case that grading involves both a classification and a ranking, the latter of which can only be based on a preference that cannot be quantitatively measured through standard units like money.

Recent work by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel has suggested that there are standards implicit within the Deweyan conception of inquiry, standards they have articulated in terms of a procedure they call discourse ethics (Apel 1990; Habermas 1985, 1993). Discourse ethics views the establishment of criteria for the rightness and wrongness of actions in ways that resonate with the pragmatic notion of truth in science: What is ethically right is the standard that would be reached by an ideal community of inquirers engaging in mutual exchange and critique unfettered by practical constraints such as the need to eat or sleep. Habermas has seen similarity between his own project and that of John Rawls. Both are thought to provide a procedural ethic, a theory of standards that specifies no particular standard, but that, like Mill's construction of the utilitarian maxim, tells us which standards are justified. Unlike the utilitarian maxim, no master standard gets proposed to test the practical standard. There are, instead, standards for people working in standard-setting bodies or groups. They must be respectful of one another, and open to all manner of critique and to everyone who is potentially affected by the standard, for example. Like Dewey, we would add that we should regard our standard-setting inquiries as fallible, even when they follow all the Habermasian rules.

Much for can be said about standards of discourse and moral theories as theories of standards, but our representative examples make our point that ethicists have been concerned with both how to come up with standards and criteria for standards but also have not ignored the contexts of justification, or worlds. Ethics is also best understood as an activity that may, occasionally, involve an appeal to an absolute standard that must be negotiated within what matters to actors in situations on the ground. What Busch and the MSU School have achieved is another language for ethical analysis that might have interesting comparative value for professional ethicists. Ethical analysis is precisely that deliberative space where people must endeavor to reason and criticize in ways intended to appeal to others who will be affected by the standards in question.

We can easily imagine a role for ethical analysis conceived in this way integrated with the social study of standards, and that these together may form projects that describe the details of the social processes of standardization *and* create opportunities for reasons to discuss and debate the implications of potential or actual standards.

CONCLUSION

For Busch, standards development becomes the locus within network activities where the die is cast for crucial dimensions of network effects and the power that accompanies them. In closing we suggest how a more nuanced account of the ethical content of Busch's standards taxonomy can be deployed within social research on network power. In this context, we can provide only a sketch of an argument that would require development at much greater length to be fully convincing.

The thought that formal standards exert power, through which they order people as well as things, is one great contribution of the MSU School. The achievement here is to demonstrate how standards development processes that might have been thought to be concerned purely with questions of science or technology have implications that delimit the freedom and capability of human beings. Yet when the standards inquiry stops at this juncture, it has imputed ethical significance without offering much in the way of what we above have called discussion or what Dewey called inquiry. That is, to point out that standards have *implications* for freedom and opportunity points implicitly to a moment in which those social practices that constitute a standard stop working and where discussion begins. However, it does not yet *undertake* discussion and as such it leaves the field to those who would deploy a master standard with little reflection or debate. The most influential (we might say *dominant*) master standards of the twentieth century were the utilitarian maxim, linked to social science through economic analysis that sought an Olympian optimization of preference satisfaction, and the categorical imperative, linked to social science through filters of rights and freedoms that were far too often modeled on an autonomous subject unrecognizable to victims of the colonial mentality.

In the twenty-first century, ethics itself may have turned toward modalities of discourse that aim to deflect the force of utilitarian and neo-Kantian attempts at final closure. In this light it is progress simply to keep a discourse open. Yet we close with the thought that to keep a discourse open nonetheless differs from a willingness to begin it in the first place. Standards need to be debated. They need to be supported by reasons and those reasons need be subjected to the critical scrutiny of skeptics. That is what discussion in the sense of ethical inquiry is all about. An important role of ethical analysis is to explore the spaces and opportunities for discussion alongside studies of the social processes through which standards come to define their objects of assessment.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kyle Powys Whyte is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Michigan State University. He is an affiliate of the Center for the Study of Standards in Society and core faculty in the American Indian Studies Program. His research and teaching interests are in environmental and agricultural justice, science and technology ethics, and American Indian philosophy. His research has been sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the Spencer Foundation, and his articles appear in journals such as *Synthese*; *Knowledge*; *Technology & Policy*; *Journal of Environmental Philosophy*; *Ethics, Place & Environment*; *Philosophy & Technology*; and *Continental Philosophy Review*. (kwhyte@msu.edu)

Paul B. Thompson is the W. K. Kellogg Chair in Agricultural, Food, and Community Ethics at Michigan State University. His interests are in environmental and agricultural ethics. He is the author of 13 books and editions, such as *The Spirit of the Soil: Agriculture and Environmental Ethics*; *The Ethics of Aid and Trade*; and *Food Biotechnology in Ethical Perspective*; and co-editor of *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*. He has served on many national and international committees on agricultural biotechnology and contributed to the National Research Council report *The Environmental Effects of Transgenic Plants*. He is a Past President of the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society and the Society for Philosophy and Technology, and is Secretary of the International Society for Environmental Ethics.

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